CHAPTER X

FROM the roof of the Fort one has a fine view of the surrounding desert. Due south-west the muddy creek curves like a snake past the little town of Khan, a dependency of Sharjah. Only the tops of the houses and the slender minaret are visible, since Khan is hidden by sand-dunes and an enchanting copse of date palms. The palm trees thicken as one looks further south, marking the beginning of the flourishing plantations which screen the town of Dubai, ten miles distant. Khan consists of about a hundred houses, and is ruled by a headman; the inhabitants are fishermen, pearl divers and sponge collectors. There is a very small boat-building industry, whilst some charming brass-bound chests are made there by native craftsmen; these chests are made of teak wood and are usually lacquered, after the Kuwait fashion. The sponge industry is unimportant and is confined to a few families. Men and women wade into the creek at low tide to collect the sponges, which are coarse and of an extremely poor grade. They cannot be exported and are used by the local Arabs.

Sharjah, a large rambling town of about 10,000 inhabitants, lies one mile north-west of the Fort, from which one has a fine view of the half-ruined fort, from one of the towers of which flies the sheikh's personal flag—a scarlet square with a wide white border. This fort, or 'palace', which lies at the back of the town, was built for strategic reasons with its gateway facing the open desert. The Khan Bahadur told me that it is about four hundred years old; the towers and the gateway were erected by the Portuguese, who established military and trading outposts on the Persian Gulf coast in the seventeenth century. Old ships' cannons, taken from the wrecks of British and French merchantmen, ornament the front of the fort; some bear the Admiralty anchor or the Royal insignia, G.R. III, and though rusty and time-worn, are still fired by the sheikh during tribal wars or on festive occasions.

The Persian Gulf was the haunt of pirates until almost the end of the nineteenth century, and the waters around Sharjah and Dubai were infested with these cruel and bloodthirsty sea-brigands,